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TAGS: PREL ECON IQ TU

SUBJECT: IRAQI CG IN ISTANBUL ON IRAQ-TURKEY RELATIONS AND  
BUILDING TRUST WITH THE LOCAL IRAQI COMMUNITY

REF: BAGHDAD 3834

Classified By: DPO Sandra Oudkirk; Reason 1.5 (d),

¶1. (C) Summary. In a courtesy call on Consulate Istanbul CG Wiener on November 27, Iraq's Consul General in Istanbul, Ambassador Salah Abdulsalam, said his two top priorities here are to rebuild contacts with the Iraqi community in Turkey and to strengthen economic, commercial, and political cooperation with Turkey. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Iraqi CG Abdulsalam described to CG Wiener on November 27 the key priorities of the Iraqi consulate in Istanbul, which was reopened in July 2006. Abdulsalam and his staff of six diplomats are focusing first on rebuilding the GOI's relations with the Iraqi community in Turkey, which he characterized as being "strained and suspicious" under Saddam and in the immediate aftermath of Iraq's liberation. He claims to have an open-door policy with all Iraqis in Turkey, has regularized the visa fees and put all Consulate financial matters under one person's control to prevent bribery and graft, and has hired several local Iraqis fluent in Kurdish, as well as an Iraqi Christian, to assist Kurdish and Iraqi Christian refugees. Abdulsalam added that anytime he has a high-level Iraqi delegation of VIPs visiting Istanbul -- almost weekly -- he insists they also take time to meet local resident Iraqis, which he felt was slowly rebuilding trust.

¶3. (C) According to Abdulsalam, the Iraqi community in Turkey is stratified. It includes a significant number of professionals (e.g., doctors, engineers) at the higher end of the socio-economic spectrum, but also includes poor and destitute Iraqis, many of whom came as refugees, and many more of whom entered Turkey illegally and have asked the Iraqi consulate for help in securing permission for them to stay in Turkey, an issue Abdulsalam said he takes a personal interest in addressing. Asked how large the Iraqi community here is, he noted that 22,800 Iraqi voted were counted in Istanbul and other local polling stations during the December 2005 Iraqi legislative elections. Some of those votes, he admitted, were later discounted, but he believes the Iraqi community in western Turkey numbers at least in the many thousands. Abdulsalam speculated that many Iraqi residents in Turkey, including professionals, would consider returning to Iraq under more stable and secure conditions, though even with the recent improvement in security in Iraq, he felt the situation was not yet stable enough to persuade them to return.

¶4. (C) Abdulsalam said strengthening bilateral relations with Turkey was his other top priority. The recent bilateral strain over PKK terrorism, he felt, was incrementally improving. He characterized at least some of the recent bilateral tension over the PKK as "a political card that the Turkish military and political parties were playing" for domestic political effect. But he underscored the GOI's commitment to working with Turkey to stop PKK terrorism, and

added that the Kurdish Regional Government also plays an important role. On that score, he said he was pleased by the recent visit to Istanbul of a Kurdish party delegation led by Kurdish Islamic Union Secretary General Salahdin Bayadin (reftel para 6), who Abdulsalam says met with PM Erdogan's foreign policy advisor, Ahmed Davutoglu, in Istanbul. Abdulsalam said Bayadin was pleased with the meeting, and speculated that contacts like that between Turkish and Kurdish officials would have a significant "calming" effect. Abdulsalam also pointed to Turkey's willingness to allow international organizations to hold a growing number of Iraq-related international seminars and training courses in Istanbul for Iraqi officials (e.g., judicial training for Iraqi judges), in lieu of holding such training in Amman or Cairo. Abdulsalam said he is also working hard to increase bilateral trade between Turkey and Iraq, especially in the energy and transportation sectors.

¶15. (C) CG Weiner thanked Abdulsalam for sharing his views, and urged him to redouble his diplomatic efforts to help secure Turkey's help in stabilizing Iraq, not only in the fight against PKK terrorism but also through expanded political, economic, and commercial cooperation.

WIENER